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Abstract

In the rhetoric of Aboriginal communities, young people are frequently positioned by adults as the key to future improvements. They talk about a time when the young people will be trained to take over the important positions in the community and there will be no more need for outsiders. In community development women are often considered to be the most important facilitators of change, as Sen (1999:203) writes: Nothing arguably, is as important today in the political economy of development as an adequate recognition of political, economic and social participation and leadership of women.

Keywords

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BOYFRIENDS, BABIES AND BASKETBALL: PRESENT LIVES AND FUTURE ASPIRATIONS OF YOUNG WOMEN IN NGUKURR

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When I finish school I would like to get a job and have a wonderful life and good kids and a lovely husband, but I don't want to have a bad life, I want to have a good life (Ngukurr student aged 16).

In the rhetoric of Aboriginal communities, young people are frequently positioned by adults as the key to future improvements. They talk about a time when the young people will be trained to take over the important positions in the community and there will be no more need for outsiders. In community development women are often considered to be the most important facilitators of change, as Sen (1999:203) writes:

Nothing arguably, is as important today in the political economy of development as an adequate recognition of political, economic and social participation and leadership of women.

Young women, therefore, can be seen as having a double responsibility for the futures of their communities. This paper explores the aspirations and expectations of a group of young women aged thirteen to twenty-three in a remote Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory of Australia. It examines how these hopes and expectations are influenced and moulded by the reality of their everyday lives and the extent to which the young women consider that they are able to influence the course of their lives and become agents for change in their own communities.

Background

The remote community of Ngukurr is home to about 900 Aboriginal people (there is a small non-Aboriginal population of teachers, nurses, administrative and maintenance workers). Of these people, 157, or about 20% are females aged between ten and twenty-five (Taylor et. al.,2000: 29).

The lives and the choices available to young women in this community have undergone significant changes during the last one hundred years. These changes began with the establishment of the Mission in 1908. Prior to the arrival of the Christian Missionary Society, girls had lives that were tightly prescribed by adults. Adolescence in the sense that it is the period between being a child and being an adult did not exist, as females were promised and married prior to the onset of puberty. Burbank (1988:55) describes this marriage pattern as an attempt to regulate female sexuality and ensure that children were only born when a women had been placed with an appropriate father.

Cole (1985) in his history of the Christian Missionary Society described the marriage arrangements made for young girls of the Mission as a “great and enduring problem”. The solution in Ngukurr was the establishment of a dormitory system which separated young men and women from their families. As one older woman from the community recalled:

The dormitory was really strict, nobody was allowed to see men, only at school time, not even in the village. You were not allowed to go home and sleep in the house with your mummy and daddy. We used to just play in that dormitory. There was a big fence around that dormitory.

Burbank (1988:4) describes the period between the onset of fertility and marriage as ‘Maidenhood’. A time corresponding to Maidenhood or adolescence emerged during these Mission times, with an emphasis on the control of female sexuality, achieved by the segregation of the sexes instead of early marriage. Older women look back at the Mission as a time when young girls were controlled and disciplined and contrast this with the situation today.

Our time was good, single girls didn't have children, didn't have a family. We learnt about work side, didn't think about boyfriends, there was plenty of time for that, do your work first. Young girls today make me feel worried, feel no good inside. It didn't happen like that when I was young. They don't have time to learn anything, just busy nursing the baby.

Enforced segregation of young men and women, in terms of the dormitory system ceased when the Mission withdrew in 1968. Adult control of young women's sexuality remains a contested area in Ngukurr. Young women today in Ngukurr attend school and move around the community with what appears to be a great deal of freedom. Adult control over the lives of adolescents in the community is reduced by the fluid relationships that many young people have with particular households. Young women talk about moving from one household to another when adults become "too strict".

Working with young women

In 2001, Corn conducted research into young male culture in Ngukurr. This study produced detailed descriptions of the bands and sport that some people were involved in. The majority of his informants were older people looking back at their period of adolescence, or commenting about young people today. Corn commented that he found the older men in the community "more articulate" and easier to talk to than the young (Corn 2001: 2).

Young women in Ngukurr are equally hard to approach. Small children in Ngukurr are inquisitive and talkative and often accompany their parents and other adults on expeditions outside the community and visits within it. There is a marked change as the girl moves into adolescence, or in the community view changes from being "a little girl" to "a young girl". Adults describe young girls as being shy, meaning reserved and easily ashamed. But adolescence is also a time when the young women create their own worlds that are separate from those that the adults and the small children inhabit. They spend their time with other girls their own age; their best friends, who are often their sisters or cousins and they shun the company of others:

I hate living with my family, only with my friends. Sometimes I feel sad without no friends. When I see my friends I feel happy, when I see my mother or my father I feel sad and sorry (Age 14).

Young women create their own space and time by “walking about at night” when adults have gone to bed. Direct questions from adults are often met with an embarrassed giggle and an obvious desire to move away as soon as possible.

Despite these difficulties, I was keen to move beyond the interpretation of adults of the young women’s lives and provide the opportunity to speak for themselves and tell their own story. This research occurred at the end of a three year engagement with the community as part of the South East Arnhem Land Collaborative Research Project (SEALCP) and as a result I was well known and trusted by members of the community. I was also known in my role of supporting the local Newspaper the *Ngukurr News* which had been established as part of the SEALCP study as a way of providing training for local people and involving them in our research.

Eight young women ranging in age from thirteen to twenty-three became my main informants in this study. They were keen to develop their skills and to learn about the production of the *Ngukurr News* as well as telling their stories. They had contact with me throughout the four month period of my study and gradually became relaxed, confident and often very articulate in telling their stories as well as developing computing and writing skills that assisted them in obtaining work in the community or furthering their education. In addition, I ran two workshops with the secondary classes at the school. The first workshop was with the entire group of nineteen young women aged fourteen to nineteen and the second was with one class comprising six girls aged fourteen to nineteen. A questionnaire was developed with the assistance of my main informants and was administered to thirty young women in the community. This group included both students and young women who had left school. This study was enriched by my involvement in many of the activities that were important in young women’s lives, going to school, basketball games, the regular discos and movies.

The adult perspective remained important, both to obtain their perspectives on the lives of young people and to reflect on their own experience, but their opinions are supplementary to the study, not the focus of it.

A diversity of experiences

The young women in Ngukurr are clearly identified. They affect a similar style of dress with loose basketball tops made out of shiny material and baggy knee length shorts. Shirts are always buttoned right to the top. This style of dress is in contrast to the brightly coloured floral, A-line, Mission style dresses favoured by the older women in the community. The young women's clothes are often derided by the older women as being too *Munanaga* (European) and for being immodest.

Despite their apparent similarity as a group, the young women have a range of different experiences, which are related to the extent that adults are able to influence their lives. These factors are in turn related to the educational experiences of the parents and their position within Ngukurr society.

Some families are described as being strict, and keep a close watch on their daughters and arrange an appropriate marriage for them:

It's a strict family, the girls are not allowed to make trouble with boys. The girls are surrounded by their brothers, they are always watching her. The sons are really strict, they have really strong discipline., and she doesn't go out much. Her mother wants to give her to someone who is straight skin for her. She will know the background of the boy and he will have a strong cultural background.

The young girl in question chooses to remain at school, although she is well over the leaving age, as this postpones the marriage that her family will arrange for her.

Many young women in Ngukurr find some flexibility within the marriage system. Although marriage to someone who is promised to them or the right skin is desirable from the adult point of view, the young women emphasise the importance of personal choice:

Young girls, when they are single, they might be promised. My sisters kids are all promised to the X family, they are all the right skin. Don't know if they will stick to them, or choose their own. When families make promises, it doesn't happen much, mostly girls choose their own. Society is changing.

Other families place an emphasis on education for their daughters and encourage them to attend the local school, or place them in boarding schools in Darwin. The majority of young women in the community however, enjoy a marked lack of adult interference in their lives, but attendant with this freedom is a lack of parental guidance about the choices they make regarding their education and future lives.

Key behaviours

The daily occupations for young unmarried women in the community, include attending the Women's Centre, helping at the crèche or attending school. Schooling in Ngukurr is provided by the Community Education Centre, there are three secondary classes with students ranging in age from fourteen to nineteen. None of these students are undertaking mainstream secondary subjects, but there have been several innovative attempts to develop vocational skills and increase the experiences of the secondary aged female students. The entire school has been part of an accelerated literacy program which is having a significant impact on students' comprehension, reading and writing in English. Young women have been involved in a hairdressing course in a nearby town. They have also formed their own Rock Band and have had support to write songs which have been professionally recorded and videoed. There were also a series of excursions out of the community, for example to play sport in Darwin and to have a cultural exchange with a girls' school in Melbourne.

Secondary school attendance however only has an impact on the minority of young women's lives. For many of the young women in the community schooling is cut short by pregnancy and marriage and the obligation to stay at home and look after the house and baby. Hospital separations for childbirth show a marked rise at the age of fifteen (Taylor et. al., 2000: 88).

Irregular attendance is also characteristic of many Ngukurr students, and the young women are no exception. Some young people do manage to arrive at school in the morning, others play a waiting game, hiding at home until their teacher drives out to look for them. Despite the young women's reluctance or ambivalence about attending school it is clear that it provides an important structure to their lives. Many comment that days without school, in the long summer holidays, or when the school is closed because of funerals are long and tedious.

Basketball

Ask any young women in Ngukurr what her favourite sport is and basketball! will be the resounding answer. The community has five female basketball teams that represent family alliances. The teams compete on a weekly basis. Many of the young women are accomplished players and their skills on the court are matched by a high level of organisation on the part of the women to make matches happen. It is often difficult to predict the timing of events in Ngukurr, which usually occur when enough people have congregated in a particular area. This is not the case with the basketball matches, where games are forfeited if a team arrives late:

Women are organised, they are really interested, they are on time, no waiting. Ever since the basketball started every Thursday, they are there without even telling them. You don't need to round them up, by 7-7:30 they are already there looking at the schedule and getting their groups together.

The women organise all aspects of the game from raising money to designing uniforms. They have regular meetings and training sessions. The basketball games are also times when there is a mentoring relationship between the older and younger women in the community. Older women are often the team captains, but the young women are the star players.

In their organisation of the basketball games, the women are aware that they are creating a space for women to be together in a setting that will not arouse any feelings of jealousy from their husbands or boyfriends. It is described by the young women as being important for the competition, but also because it is a time when women can get together as a group and talk about problems. This is particularly important for young married women, who may have few other opportunities to leave their houses and their husbands to spend time with their friends. As one young woman commented:

It's the only place where girls can talk together, all friends, we talk to our old school mates and have a lot of fun. It's women's time together, you have time to relax and have fun. We talk about other things and make jokes to each other. Even the girls who are usually locked up at home. All the kids go too, we look after them while their mummy plays.

The women's basketball games are not just appreciated by the women themselves. The competitions form one of the most inclusive social occasions in Ngukurr. They are controlled by the women, but attended by a large section of the community.

Walking about at night

The activity which is coyly known as 'walking about at night' is for many of the young women the defining aspect of being an adolescent. Young women plan to slip out of sight from adults at the end of the movies, discos and basketball games. The young women go out in small groups, defined by their family relationships with the aim of either forming new sexual relationships with young boys or to maintain an existing relationship. Walking about at night is a highly organised activity and involves cooperation within the groups. The young women assist each other in forming relationships and also perform a surveillance role to check that the boys are not cheating on their friends:

When you are walking round in groups and a girl wants to meet her boyfriend, she send her friends to find him and tell him that she will meet him in a secret place. That's how they get together for a long time alone. When they are together the boy tells the girl not to go with any other boys. They will stay together unless the boy does something, maybe meet another girl. The girls' friends walk around and see the boy with another girl and she will go and tell her friend and they will break up. (Age 15).

Despite the excitement of evading adults and arranging liaisons the young women are very aware that it is a high risk activity. Walking about at night and teenage pregnancy are seen as synonymous by most of the young women:

I like to walk around with my friends at night. I like following my sisters and friends. My mum and uncle don't like us to walk around, that's how we end up with problems like fighting with other girls. Our parents don't like us to get pregnant because we are too you (age 15).

When girls walk about at night and have a date with boys-that's how they get pregnant (age 17).

There is little awareness among the women that such activities also put them at the risk of contracting a sexually transmitted disease, and no suggestions about the possibility of avoiding such diseases, as one of the older women commented:

These girls, they no more savvy what they can catch. Parents have to look if they are losing body or weight or eyebrows are falling out. Young girls tie rags around their head because their hair and eyebrows are falling out.

Aspirations

The questionnaire, workshops and interviews all explored the hopes that young women had for their futures and the plans they had formulated to achieve their goals. Many of the young women found it difficult to imagine and describe what their future lives would be like.

When they were thinking about possible careers, the young women in the workshops were influenced by immediate stimuli. The day before the workshops the class had attended the circuit court in the community. The clerk of the court and the magistrate took time to explain their roles and the roles of lawyers and the police. Most of the young women wrote in their responses that they wanted to be lawyers magistrates or work for the police. Their conceptions of what people in these professions actually do is limited:

I would like to work for the police and drive around all day (age 14).

The questionnaire and discussions outside the school produced a much more conservative range of career options. Their aspirations are confined to a limited range of community based options which reflects the occupational experience of most people. Two young women said that they wanted to work for NORFORCE,

which is the Indigenous reserve of the Australian Army. Although NORFORCE is dominated by young men, two young women in Ngukurr are currently involved.

The questionnaire then asked the respondents to think about the sort of job that they would like to be doing in ten years time. The range of options that the young women provided changed very little. Only one young woman described the development of a career with her position as an office assistant providing the skills and experience to become a book keeper. One young woman described an interest in running her own business, but was not able to describe what sort of business this would be.

Instead of developing a career, most of the respondents considered that they would move around the various employment options in the community. They commented that they might “get bored” in one institution and move around “for a change”. Previous investigation of training and job stability (Taylor et. al, 2000) revealed that this kind of movement between institutions is characteristic of the Ngukurr employment scene.

No respondent discussed the importance of achieving at school or undertaking post school training to achieve their goals. Interestingly no young women talked about becoming a hairdresser or musician, despite the level of exposure to these potential careers. One respondent said that she would go to university “to know everything what’s right” but saw herself working as an assistant in the shop in ten years time.

I also explored what sort of living arrangements the young women would like to have in the future, where they would like to live and what sorts of things they would like their house to contain. The majority said they would be living in Ngukurr, and could not imagine living anywhere else, but that they would like to have a house of their own, which given the current levels of overcrowding in the community appears to be an impossible dream. The responses about what houses would look like and contain reflect the poverty of most people’s material possessions in that the young women describe things that were not in their houses at present.

The things I would like to have in my house are a television, video and a telephone. In my kitchen I would like to have cups, plates, spoons, knives

and forks. I like to have on my window dolphin curtains. I like to have on my sheets pictures of a flower (age 18).

My house would have a video, a stereo and a chair (age 14)

In my house I would have cushions, a bunk and a washing machine (age 19).

Expectations

The unmarried young women considered that pregnancy, usually followed by marriage are inevitable parts of their lives. There are very few example of unmarried women living in the community. In one of the school workshops, an older woman (one of the girl's mothers) was described as having a enviable life free from male bullying. But this life was achieved after she has been married and had children. The young women were unsure that they could achieve such a life without being married first:

You need to get married so that you can have children to look after you.

No you don't, you don't have to have children, you can find a job and look after yourself

But it's hard to look after children without a husband

Marriage

Although it is seen as inevitable, few of the young women have any conception that marriage is a comfortable and happy state. Those who are married describe marriage as a loss of freedom, where their husband attempts to assume control of their lives. Marriage also leads to a young woman becoming invisible , as they are expected to stay at home:

Young married women are expected to stay at home and do housework. When they are married they are expected to wear dresses past their knees. Married women are not allowed to shave their legs, pluck their eyebrows, wear earrings.

When you are married, you are isolated from your friends and family and sometimes your sisters. You are only expected to talk to members of your husband's family.

The unmarried women, despite their continued efforts to “hold on to a boy” had few romantic notions about marriage and their future husbands. The epithets given to husbands were “bossy”, “demanding”, “drunk”, “violent” and “unfaithful”.

Boys don't help in the house, they are big bosses. He'd kill you if you didn't wash his clothes, he'd bash you up. (Age 15).

Men don't do nothing good for their wives. Drunken man says “cook my beef for me” . He'd still bash you even if you were too sick to cook for him. (Age 16)

Most of the young women also considered that violence towards women was part of marriage. Although women stated that violence that was the result of drinking, drug abuse or bad temper should not be tolerated (and could be reported to the police), they did describe situations where male violence against women was accepted as being appropriate behaviour. The young women talked about wives being lazy or unfaithful and expressed the view that in such circumstances that it was expected that a husband would hit his wife:

Sometimes their wives are lazy and don't know how to cook or clean around the house. And they answer back their husbands when their husband is saying the right thing. When they answer back their husband gets cross and starts hitting them. I think its their own fault because they should listen to their husband and what they say to them.. (Age 14).

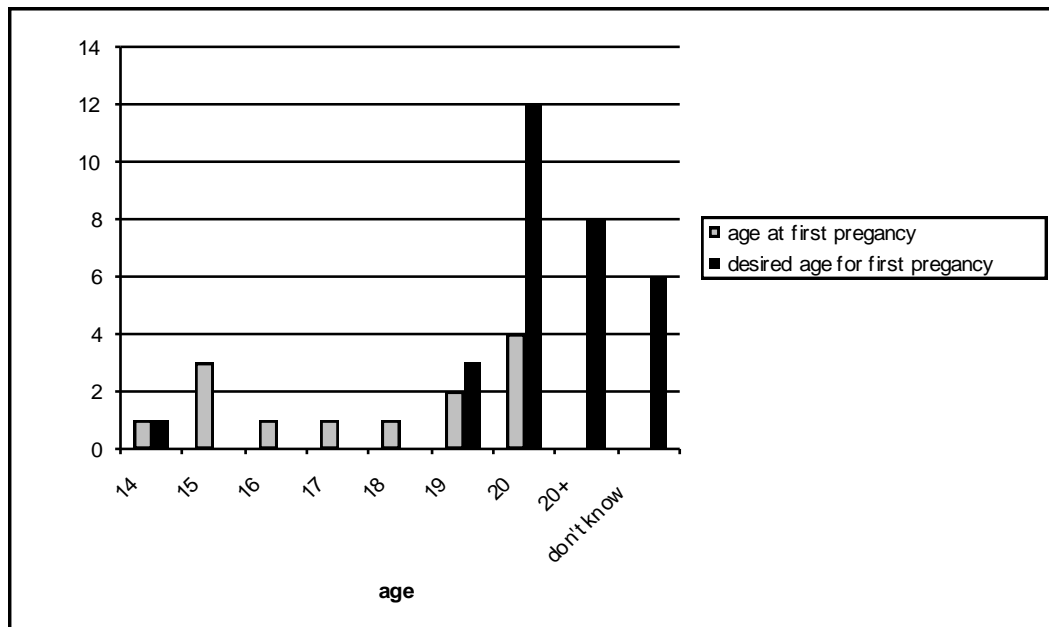
Young women also said that they expected, tolerated and forgave a level of violence from their boyfriends:

They get a bit jealous and they start bashing you up and you won't like them, but they will come back and say sorry to you (age 15).

Pregnancy

The questionnaire asked the young women about the age when they had their first child. Of the thirteen women who had babies all had had them at the age of twenty or under, and five out of the group had their first child at sixteen or under. The young women were also asked about the age that they thought it was best to begin having children. The majority considered that twenty years and over would be the best time.

Figure 1: Actual versus desirable age for first pregnancy



Two of the young women who became regular informants are unmarried mothers aged fourteen and fifteen. Both girls are still at school and their babies are being looked after by their relations. Both young women commented that having a baby so young made their lives very difficult. They said that they would not allow their own daughters to walk about at night and have boyfriends.

There are a lot of problems when you have a baby young. They are hard to look after, you don't get a chance to walk around with your friends and go to the disco. You have to look after your baby, you have to bath them. You really miss them while you are at school. I think girls should wait until they are big enough, maybe thirty years old to have a baby (mother aged 15).

Other girls observed their friend's pregnancies and the way that their lives had changed after the baby was born. They commented that life for these young girls was boring because they were not able to be with their friends anymore.

Its not funny, because you feel lonely and you don't know what to do. You sit around by yourself and you see your friends walking around, you want to follow them, but you have to look after your baby. Your mum says "you can't go, you have the baby to look after (Age 17).

Despite the fear that young women expressed about getting pregnant, many of them were fatalistic about their risk of becoming pregnant. Walking about at night led to pregnancy. They were pragmatic about their reality of their lives with a baby, and said that if first their parents were unhappy with them, that they would still be able to get support from their other relations, and through child support payments.

Very few of the young women talked about contraception and the possibility of preventing pregnancy. Only one young woman talked about the long term contraceptive injection, but was unsure whether she would be able to have it:

I'd like to get that Depo in my arm, that one that lasts for three years. Maybe next year I can have that needle. (age 17)

Self worth of young women

The young women I talked to considered that being female was a fundamental impediment to being able to formulate and achieve their goals. They felt that they were constrained by family obligations, by their difficulties in avoiding pregnancy and by the dominance of men within marriage.

I would be happy to be a boy. I would be a good man and take care of my family and kids. I wouldn't get involved with any other women.

Boys have more freedom, boys can find their own wife. They can go and live somewhere else. They can go away from their family.

Girls have lots of hard times. Girls stay at home all the time.

They indicated that they felt that they were not valued in the community and that they had little value for themselves.

Girls are weak, girls are good for staying at home

Boys are more talented than girls, boys do things fast. They have jobs like a mechanic, but girls are not strong enough.

The violence that they experienced and expected in their sexual relations contributed to their lack of self worth, for example in one secondary workshop a young woman suggested that the only way to avoid violence in relationships was “to go to Melbourne and have a sex change to become a boy”.

Young women as agents for change, for themselves and their community

Adolescence is a time when young people begin to formulate hopes and expectations for their future lives. These hopes become an important motivation for deciding on courses of action (Branstadter & Rothermund, 2002:118), for example participating in education, obtaining training for a career. Researchers such as Knox et. al., (2000) have found that adolescents are able to consider a range of future options for their lives and to develop plans and strategies to

achieve the outcomes they desire. Markus and Nurius (1996) divide these into positive and negative categories; “what we would like to become” and “what we are afraid of becoming”. Both the desire to achieve a particular kind of life and the desire to avoid particular circumstances influence the attitudes of young people.

Adolescents’ concepts of their future lives encompass a variety of life domains, including family and relationships, but often ideas about education and future occupation feature prominently (Malmerg & Norrgarrd, 1999:35). Authors such as Yowell stress that these future selves are not simply abstract knowledge but include also the ‘specific scripts, strategies, plans and associated affect for actualization of a goal’ (2000:). As well as positive concepts of the future, adolescents develop “feared selves” or a set of ideas about the sort of lives that they wish to avoid.

Not all adolescents however have the capacity to develop goals that are not abstract. Brantlinger (1993) found that youth from low income backgrounds had only a vague understanding of how to achieve their goals, while those from a high income group were able to provide detailed plans of how they would achieve their goals. The role of parents, and the experience of parents is an important factor, for example parents who have experienced tertiary education, are more likely to encourage their children to go to university than parents who have not had this experience. Moreover, they are also more likely to be able to give assistance and advice on this course of action (Kerpelman et al., 2002).

As with the adolescents in the lower socio economic groups the majority of young women in Ngukurr have not developed highly thought out life goals or clear and detailed strategies of how to achieve these goals. The choices that young women have are constrained by their narrow range of experience. They project for themselves a life very similar to that of their own mothers, which is characterised by early pregnancies and perhaps a series of jobs in one of the Ngukurr institutions. Some small changes are apparent, two girls considered that NORFORCE would be an acceptable career because they had observed other girls in the community taking this path.

Although young women frequently said that life for them in the community was hard, and that they were aware that there were not many job opportunities for them, they were determined to stay in the community. Unlike some other

economically disadvantaged young women, who are exposed to high levels of family violence (Hall, 2000) the Ngukurr young women do not focus on education and developing a career as a way out of their situation.

The young women often experience minimal adult interference in their lives. Sporadic attempts of adults to exert control are evaded by simply moving from household to household within extended families. It is clear however that this apparent freedom engenders just the opposite, as adult guidance and direction is important in the development of future life choices. Furthermore the young woman become defined by adults as being wild and undisciplined, further reducing the value in adult eyes of any contribution that young women can make to their community. But there is some evidence that the community is beginning to value the contribution that young people can make, including young women. For example in recent community consultations about the future role of the Community Government Council, young women were consulted separately about their opinions. Some new positions have also become available in the community and have been filled by young women who were considered to both have the educational qualifications and the responsibility to fulfil such a role.

Violence in relationships was a continuing theme in the discussions with young women. Such violence brings a serious threat to young women's futures. As well as immediate physical damage to women, which erodes self worth, the threat of male violence in relationships means that young women are not in the position to communicate with their partners about safe sexual practices. Wood et. al., 1998 observing a similar situation among South African youth comment that sexual health interventions will not be successful until young women are empowered with sexual information and adolescent are educated about the non-acceptability of violence (Wood et. al., 1998: 240).

The women's capacity to organise things that are important for themselves and the community is demonstrated by the continuing success of the basketball competitions. No other event in Ngukurr occurs on such a regular basis and is the focus of attention for the community as a whole. This event occurs within the 'Aboriginal domain' of activity in Ngukurr, as is not directed by Europeans. Perhaps because of this factor the high levels of organisation and the management skills of the young women involved have remained unnoticed.

Conclusion

The future of young women as leaders and active agents of change in their own community is limited by the educational deficits, their expectations that their lives will be directed and controlled by their husbands and by their own perceptions of female inferiority. It is also influenced by their experience within the community, the choices that are available and the lack of role models.

There are some positive experiences of being a woman within their own community that they can build upon. Those young women who attend secondary school are being exposed to a wider range of experiences, life choices and potential roles for women.

The fact that young women do have the capacity to organise aspects of their own lives is evident in tactics and planning that surround walking around at night and the evident cooperation of the young women in this activity. This however is not something which is condoned by the community as a whole. Furthermore despite the value placed on this activity by young women, it must be acknowledged that it is an activity which exposes young women to the risk of early pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and physical abuse. There is an urgent need for education in the community for both young men and women about the non-acceptability of violence in relationships and the choices that they can make about avoiding pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

Basketball is an activity that is highly valued by the community, which is managed by the women themselves. It is a activity which provides young women the chance to learn from older women, to work together to make decisions and to take responsibility for their actions.

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